

Faculty Chair  
Report to the Board  
May 19, 2022

Many thanks to President Menjares for giving me the opportunity to address the whole Board today.

I would like to begin by expressing my deep appreciation to all of you for working so tirelessly in this very time-intensive, emotionally fraught experiment of shared governance that we have entered into this year. You have entered into multiple listening sessions—with Faculty Council, with the Faculty LGBTQ+ Task Force—you have had many meetings with the consultants, I think all or almost all of you have participated in at least one Work Group, some more than one, and you have extended your allotted time for this monumental Board meeting in particular. This level of engagement is really difficult to sustain on top of all your professional demands, all the responsibilities of home and family, not to mention the never-ending complications of COVID. I know that this has cost you a lot, I thank you for the sacrifices you have made in service to our university.

I also want to say what a positive experience I had in the LGBTQ+ working group with your colleagues Joshua, George, Dean, Denise, and Cedric. This truly was a microcosm of what I'm hoping SPU as a whole can be. All of us—faculty, staff and trustees—were personally at different points on the spectrum of theological views regarding human sexuality, and all of us had very different experiences influencing those views. And I think all of us were able to set personal preference to one side in order to better hear one another and to discern a path forward that was in the best interests of SPU as a whole. It was truly a pleasure to come meet with this group every day. (When I first wrote that sentence, the autocorrect changed my misspelling of “pleasure” to “pressure.” And that seems appropriate as well. It was truly a pressure and a pleasure.)

I struggled quite a bit with what to say to you today. There are many things faculty would like me to communicate. Morale is still extremely low. The relative calm we have experienced during this process is masking a very deep well of tumultuous emotion, held in check for the sake of the shared governance decision process. Salary and cost of living continue to be a major concern. There is a dearth of resources for everyday operations that makes the thought of finding creative and inspired solutions a pipe dream. Many of these things have been addressed at length in the reports from the many work groups.

At this time, I want to talk a little bit about SPU's identity as a Christian institution of higher learning.

When talking about faith, there are many church hymns that use metaphors like foundations, fortresses, rocks. We stand firm with conviction on terra firma (as opposed to shifting sand). This is completely understandable and appropriate. Some of the church's primary jobs have

been to guard against heresy; to persist in the face of persecution; to provide comfort, safety, and stability for the abused, the lost, and the dispossessed. The church's job is to take a stand.

But I am not sure that these stony, stolid images are a suitable metaphor for the Christian academic project. As I understand it, a university's primary jobs are to probe, to question, to explore, to complicate—to wonder whether we have gotten it entirely right. Truth for the academic is always provisional, subject to change if we come across more information and experiences. And, I would argue, truth must be even more provisional for the *Christian* academic. Because no one knows better than the Christian academic that we see through a glass darkly. We do our very best to get things right, but given our fallenness, we know we must keep a little chink of our minds open to the possibility that we might turn out to be wrong. In all things, scripture can be our guide, but there is always that pesky little scrim of human interpretation inserted between us and the Word.

In the midst of our current crisis, many of us have lamented that SPU has no clear vision that we can all rally around, that can unite us in our purpose. We have in fact brought this problem up today, in this room. Who are we? How did we come to have so much disagreement amongst ourselves? What do we *stand* for?

While this confusion may seem novel, this quandary is not at all new for SPU. As Steve Moore and Bill Woodward argue, Seattle Pacific has been, since its founding, continually arguing with itself over what to teach, and “it has done so in an atmosphere of *dynamic tension* and *fruitful ambiguity*, certain that it wishes to be Christian, unsettled on the curricular particulars.” Note the phrases *dynamic tension* and *fruitful ambiguity*. Tension and ambiguity do not typically evoke such positive connotations. But this “bracing brew” of constantly negotiated ideas and visions is in fact SPU's distinctive and its strength.

Our non-sectarian founding and the ecumenical pillar in our statement of faith have most certainly contributed to this dynamic tension and fruitful ambiguity, especially regarding what a Christian university should be, and how it should engage with culture. As noted in the book *Models for Christian Higher Education* (Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian), different denominational traditions provide very different models for teaching and learning in a Christian context. A brief sampling:

- The Reformed tradition, focusing on the sovereignty of God, takes a cerebral approach, arguing that we must approach every discipline from a distinctly Christian perspective that governs how we understand that discipline and transforms how we live.
- In contrast, Mennonites, rather than transforming their “living by [their] thinking,” prefer to “transform [their] thinking by [their] living” in “a radically Christocentric” way, emulating the actions of Jesus.
- For Lutherans, “the task of the Christian scholar is not to impose on the world . . . a distinctly ‘Christian world view’ [as the Reformed tradition does]; rather it is to study the world as it is and then bring that world into *dialogue* with the Christian vision of redemption and grace. This approach is less susceptible to the common fear of secularization and pluralism, because it advocates a dialectical process in which all of

God's creation—worthy of study in its own right—actually helps shape and refine our understanding of our faith.

- The Catholic vision of higher education is a sacramental one which attempts to “bring the presence of Christ into a world filled with suffering, poverty, and injustice.”
- And the Wesleyan approach, sometimes called the Wesleyan quadrilateral, exhorts us to approach Scripture using the lenses of tradition, reason, and experience.

We have faculty, staff, administrators and trustees from all these traditions and many more. This undoubtedly contributes to cacophony about our vision. But what treasures and riches lie herein!

Given this heritage of disagreement and diverse perspective, it seems SPU's vision has never really been about what we *stand* for (a stasis), but about what we *do*. What we do here, or at least what we have long said we aspire to do—in our commitments to reconciliation, and to “engaging the culture”—is engage disagreement and *lean in* to conflict and diverse perspectives, rather than evade them and walk away. We embrace *dynamic tension* and *fruitful ambiguity*, and we strive to do so in a context of charity and love, trying to provide a space where people feel able to speak with conviction no matter what their perspective.

I acknowledge that this vision is pretty difficult to market: “Come learn with us—we'll show you how complicated life really is. Who's up for some really hard work that will be frustrating and uncomfortable?”

But this year, in the Work Groups, we have in fact embraced tension and ambiguity (another term for it might be embracing the “not yet”). We have tried to model embracing tension and ambiguity in the SPU in One Room events this year. I have worked to practice this discipline by walking around campus and conversing with faculty and staff I disagree with. This is the “Third Way” model that the diverse LGBTQ work group has suggested may be most in line with our mission and identity as we also work to adapt and move forward from an inoperable status quo.

We have a long way to go, and there is much continual hurt and discontent. And no matter which path forward we choose, there will be conflict. Conflict is built into this broken world. The so-called Third Way does not promise to eradicate conflict. But it does attempt to help us *navigate* and *deal constructively* with *continuous* conflict. That makes it the hardest way. Few Christian universities and fewer churches are really trying to do this. It certainly distinguishes us from society's default mode of relating to one another. And it is a skill that our students desperately need to develop as we send them off into the world, where they will be thrust into relationship with all kinds of people with all kinds of identities and all kinds of views.

And that brings me to the topic of relationship. None of this conflict engagement is possible, and none of it will be productive, without us being in significant relationship with one another. At SPU, we recognize this. This is why we so highly value in-person instruction, low teacher-to-student ratios, and our ecumenical commitment. This is why we agreed to these Work Groups.

Being in relationship is essential to helping us understand how to live out, how to *incarnate* God's word. Because the gospel is relational. I suspect few have been converted by a Gideon Bible sitting in their motel room. The deeper and stronger our human relationships, the more God's truths and purposes will be revealed to us. And this is why so many of us feel it is so important to invite everyone possible into this wrestling process with us.

I want to allude here to the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, in Luke 24:13-35. I'm a little dubious about sharing my interpretation with you because I'm going to send these remarks to the faculty later today, and I'm sure this will get picked apart by both the theologians and the biblical scholars. So, know that this has not been vetted—and like a good Christian academic, I am open to being corrected.

But in this story some disciples are walking along the road, talking about how disappointed they are that Jesus was crucified, and how they can't get their heads around the crazy talk from the women that he might be risen. They were deep in an academic project, their hearts and minds entirely preoccupied with the evidences and non-evidences of who Jesus of Nazareth was, yet they could not perceive Christ himself walking beside them. It was not until they invited this perceived stranger into their home and broke bread with him that "their eyes were opened." Christ was going to move on, but they said, no, stay. He was waiting for them to take the initiative.

To me this story suggests that those who seem other, who seem completely unacquainted with our own way of viewing the world, those from whom we are estranged, might bring Jesus to us in a way we never could have imagined in our wildest speculations, if only we invite them in and share communion.

The LGBTQ+ group has suggested that this invitational posture necessitates changing our conduct policy. The Free Methodist church has provisionally declared that such an invitation will sever SPU's relationship with the church. This language implying *disinvitation* truly grieves me and all of us who have worked so hard to find a way to preserve affiliation. Whatever the intent behind it, it is difficult not to read the church's pronouncement as a refusal to embrace conflict, to value relationship, to take an invitational posture—all things I'm arguing have defined SPU's mission.

I know for many, the question of our affiliation with the Free Methodist Church looms large in our calculations about whether SPU can retain its Christian identity. The church needs to do what the church decides is best for the church. And perhaps the church can be convinced to change its mind, and work with us to find a way we can be in relationship, and I know many are still working to preserve and enhance the relationship. But I utterly reject the slippery slope fallacy that if we lose affiliation we will lose our Christian identity.

Anyone who believes that this university is in imminent danger of no longer being Christian, or believes that any SPU faculty person, because of their personal view on human sexuality (conservative or progressive), is not Christian—anyone who believes any of those things

fundamentally misunderstands the nature and of this particular institution and the people who work and teach within it. Every single individual here is motivated by Christian mission, and this has given us tremendous resiliency through unfathomable hardships. In my 16 years here, I have never come across a faculty member who could not articulate the integration of their faith and their vocation. And in the past year, I have not talked to a single faculty member, from the most conservative to the most progressive on this sexuality question, who isn't utterly committed to Christian education. This intense and universal Christian commitment is indeed what makes our current conflict so difficult, as everyone's views are so strongly rooted in their understanding of faith.

This Christian commitment has been manifested and nurtured by an incredibly robust and complex Statement of Faith that holds sometimes competing principles in *healthy and productive tension*. And every faculty member has been trained to interact with that tension-filled statement in the application and interview process and in every stage of promotion. They talk not only about how that Wesleyan statement interacts with their own faith pillars, but also how it interacts with their vocation—their discipline, their approach to research, and their approach to pedagogy. Faith integration is part of the SPU DNA. If the Free Methodist Church finds it can no longer remain in relationship with us, we certainly have the capacity to find churches and denominations who are willing to do so.

There will always be conflict and disagreement. And this is in fact not something to shun but to embrace, even to delight in. It is evidence of the teeming diversity of people and perspectives that God in his pleasure has brought forth in the fullness of his creation.

I trust that in whatever decisions you make, you will honor the work that faculty, staff, administration, and your own colleagues have done together. Trust the expertise, trust the process we have all agreed to. Trust that Christ and the Gospel have been manifested in these relationships we have built with one another. The trust you show will help us all to cement our trust in one another. We are all part of one body.

I am not an alum of SPU. My Calvinist background might even strike some as opposed to the Wesleyan view. (I have had good-natured and delightful conversations with colleagues in Theology about this.) But I believe very strongly in Christian higher education in general, and in SPU specifically, which has provided an immensely fruitful and complex vision of how we might further God's kingdom in this very broken world.

You have very weighty and very numerous decisions before you. I have seen firsthand how faithful you are to God, and how dedicated you are to SPU. My prayer for you is that the Holy Spirit will fill you and guide you toward a path, whatever that may be, that will help SPU—and most importantly our students—to flourish in the service of Christ.

April Middeljans